Decolonization in Greenland and Nunavut and Resource Exploitation for a Decarbonized World: What does an Arctic Century Mean?

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The Arctic is again at the crux of global attention. While several regions globally are facing intensified interest for their natural resources, Greenland has similarly faced recent rising attention from regional Arctic actors, such as the United States of America, and globally, such as China. Greenland is appearing to be referred to as the 21st Century Kingmaker by some policy commentators. What does this Arctic century mean and for whom? The mining of minerals is rising to support a global energy transition and industrial needs, sparking geopolitical battles of influence and interests where global powers such as the US and China are entering in competition to secure these resources. While global attention is veering towards the mineral-rich Arctic, especially Greenland and Nunavut, some dynamics – such as the purchase proposal of Greenland made by President Trump – clash with regional dynamics of self-determination from state colonial powers. As the Nunavut Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement came into effect in January 2024, and as Greenland is continuing its course to secure independence from Denmark, regional self-governance is confronted by strategic imperial maneuvering by global powers. Global energy transition goals, as supported by the United Nations SDGs, while under the banner of sustainable development, thereby spark foundational discussions pertaining to "glocal" governance and human security in a decarbonized world. Echoing Saami critiques of green colonialism, this study aims to question the notion of peace and security through resource exploitation in Greenland and Nunavut as global powers seek to secure their interests in the region, sparking the Arctic Century. This study is supported by qualitative content analysis of policy documents, media articles, and interviews with key Greenlandic and Nunavummiut stake- and rights- holders conducted in 2024. The study contributes to the study of Arctic security through the development of Arctic decolonial ecological security shaping natural resources development in Nunavut and Greenland.

Introduction

As U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance left Greenland after a whirlwind of statements late March and early April 2025, the threat of U.S. invasion – whether through military, economic, or political control, or a mixture of all of the above – rang alarm bells among Greenlanders and the Danish government (Edvardsen & Hansen, 2025; Livesay et al., 2025). President Trump has "to have

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Greenland" and Vice President Vance warns that the world can't "bury our heads in the sand – or in this case the snow" (ibidem).

These explicit threats confront how the Arctic was once referred to as Exceptional – a region framed within a paradigm of peace and cooperation separate from outside geopolitical tensions. Despite a media tendency to portray Arctic Peoples and governments as almost powerless against the titans of the global community – such as the U.S. and China – Arctic peoples and their governments have, over the past decades, built up their resilience and self-determination law-by-law (Loukacheva, 2007a; Soer, 2025). The creation of the Territory of Nunavut in 1999 following the Nunavut Act of 1993, and the signing of Greenland's Home Rule Act in 1978 and the Self-Government Act in 2008, forged into law a current of regional Inuit self-determination in response to colonial state violence. As Greenland and Nunavut continue to enact their governance and self-determination, international frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Sustainable Development Goals have shaped dynamics towards sustainable development and environmental justice within domestic legal frameworks. However, this dynamic is facing contestation from industry pressures and international state actors. As the Arctic Ocean may become ice-free in the summer by 2050, these prospects open economic speculations on the increase of the shipping industry in the region – including tourism and other commercial sectors such as fisheries (Dawson et al., 2014; Dawson, 2018; van Luijk et al., 2021). While offshore oil and gas drilling has been banned under Canadian law since 2019 under the Order Prohibiting Certain Activities in Arctic Offshore Waters, and similarly banned under Greenlandic law since 2021, the Trump presidency and the opening of Norwegian Arctic waters in the Barents Sea for exploration mark rising interests towards Arctic resources, where the region is estimated to hold 90 billion barrels of oil, 1,669 trillion cubic feet of gas, and 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids. These estimates were drawn by the United States Geological Survey in 2008 (Bird et al., 2008). 84% of these undiscovered Arctic resources are estimated to be offshore.

Similar dynamics underpin the development of the mining industry. Greenland and Nunavut are estimated to hold significant mineral resources. While Canada has some of the largest reserves of Rare Earth Elements worldwide, Canada is not a commercial producer with all projects still in exploratory or processing phases (Natural Resources Canada, 2025). Greenland is seeking to further develop its resource exploitation sector as its Mineral Resources Strategy 2025-2029 indicates. Nunavut, while also considering the mining sector as an important vector for the territory's economy and livelihood opportunities, has restricted its commercial and mining land use under its new 2025 Land Use Plan.

Against this rush towards resource exploitation, the reality is much more nuanced. Qualified high-skilled labour is currently lacking in both Greenland and Nunavut, as well as infrastructures such as roads and overall connectivity just to name these two. Additionally, environmental impacts assessment regulations and local ecological epistemologies further frame the development of the sector. The Arctic century is thereby framed at the crux between resource exploitation and its global geopolitical repercussions within great power politics convening at the regional level. As such, this study seeks to question the framing of both peace (cooperation) and security (hard and human) amidst this crux between regional natural resources development and international relations. Oran Young, in his seminal work on the study of Arctic politics, links Arctic Exceptionalism to environmental management of common resources, with the addition of Indigenous self-

determination (1992, p.11-18). These linkages are here analyzed as well, amidst growing regional tensions, renewed interests in natural resource development, and Inuit self-governance. As such, while domestic and global pressures appear to be rising in the region to push towards intensified natural resource exploitation, the sector is nonetheless shaped by the confrontation of both domestic ecological concerns shaped by Inuit epistemologies (ecological security), local capacity constraints, and these international economic and political pressures – thereby inscribing Arctic environmental management within the analysis of regional security dynamics.

As resource exploitation in this context of global energy transition goals is reaching the realm of national critical security, and as the Arctic is gaining global momentum for this exploitation, governance becomes a balancing act of interests between state sovereignty, local decision-making powers of Arctic Peoples, global economic development, and foreign states' Arctic investments. These interconnections between local and global dynamics form a glocal governance, where it is precisely these continuous interconnections that shape both local and global governance as applied to the Arctic region. The puzzle of Arctic environmental governance as seen through the two cases of Nunavut and Greenland is reaching a fracturing point. As some are claiming that the 21st century will be an Arctic Century with Greenland as its Kingmaker (Menenez, 2025), this study seeks to re-evaluate the notion of peace and security (Exceptionalism) through the lens of resource exploitation (environmental governance) in Greenland and Nunavut in juxtaposition with Indigenous self-determination as global powers aim to secure their interests in the region (regional security dynamics). The three key themes – environmental governance, exceptionalism, and security – are thereby shaped by a complex web of interconnected concepts – power and sustainability, the resource curse, and decolonial ecological security – seen here through structuration theory, which highlights the interconnectedness.

This article is divided in two sections. The first section is divided into three subsections: (i) a critical assessment of the notion of Arctic Exceptionalism; (ii) a re-evaluation of capacity constraints in Nunavut and Greenland; and (iii) an analysis of power dynamics under structuration theory. Using the analysis on power dynamics under the framework of structuration theory, the second section delves into the ideological crossroads of sustainable natural resource development. This section is supported by four phases: (i) an inquiry in Inuit development juxtaposed to colonial development frameworks, (ii) the juxtaposition of (human) rights and sovereignty in resource development, (iii) the confrontation of the resource curse with global energy transition, and (iv) a theoretical reflection on Arctic decolonial ecology as security. These areas of inquiry offer insights into what this Arctic Century might entail. The analysis of the two sections is supported by qualitative thematic content analysis of policy documents, legal Acts and Agreement, scientific publications, and interviews with key Greenlandic (3) and Nunavummiut (18) stake- and rights- holders conducted in 2024. The interviews conducted primarily in Nunavut (18), with the addition of key political and economic stakeholders in Greenland (3), are utilized under a thematic content analysis framework, from which the key themes extracted and juxtaposed to the wider scientific literature on the subject and to government public policies. The interviews, conducted with local inhabitants and representatives from the private energy sector and the public sector (both territorial government and municipal government), touched on several topics related to incorporation of Indigenous knowledge in public policy on energy development, and to the public-private collaborative potential in the Arctic region. The government policies and Acts and Agreements analyzed for this study, both Canadian and Greenlandic, relate directly to natural resources

development (such as devolution agreements, the Nunavut Wildlife Act, or the Critical Minerals Strategy), and to consultation (such as the Canadian Duty to Consult framework, and economic development frameworks such as the ESG Framework). Thematic content analysis serves to extract tendencies, operative frameworks, and epistemological conceptualizations surrounding how security and peace are shaped by environmental management of natural resources.

Arctic Exceptionalism: Between Myth and Hope for a Better World

Arctic Exceptionalism has been used repeatedly to describe Arctic relations by both experts of the region and by the media – first developed by Oran Young in his landmark seminal work on conflict and cooperation to describe a region unique in common resources management (1992). Amidst global tensions between states, the Arctic has been portrayed as an area of peace and scientific cooperation where animosity has been kept outside its borders (Devyatkin, 2023; Gerhardt, et al., 2010; Lackenbauer, Kikkert, 2009; Olesen, 2020; Volquardsen, 2025; Young, 1992). With the Arctic Council at its center, Arctic Exceptionalism remained viable with the Council standing as a model of cross-border scientific cooperation, bridging fields and languages. Governance in several areas, including environmental governance, has been spearheaded by the 8 Arctic member states, 6 Permanent Participants representing the Indigenous Peoples of the Arctic, and 38 observers, implementing work through the 6 working groups on contaminants, monitoring and assessment, conservation of flora and fauna, emergency prevention and preparedness and response, marine environment protection, and sustainable development. Since the creation of the Arctic Council in 1996, the organization has seen many Chairs and has provided an important venue for the negotiation of three international agreements on cooperation on aeronautical and marine search and rescue in 2011, cooperation on marine oil pollution preparedness and response in 2013, and enhancing international Arctic scientific cooperation in 2017. Anchored in the legacy of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy establised in 1991, the Arctic Council has been representative of what it means for the Arctic to be a "region of peace, stability and constructive cooperation, that is a vibrant, prosperous, sustainable and secure home for all its inhabitants, including Indigenous Peoples, and where their rights and wellbeing are respected. (Arctic Council, n.d.)"

Against the reality of scientific cooperation, the Arctic has also been central in military preparedness. Several U.S. military bases were constructed in Greenland during the Cold War, and the DEW Line – Distant Early Warning Line – established from 1957 until 1993, was set to detect an air attack from the Soviet Union. Iqaluit's airport was first established as a military airport and is now also used as an operating base by the Royal Canadian Air Force (Gagnon, 2002). The fall of the USSR signaled a different era for the Arctic, but the underlying military preparedness never disappeared. This first section seeks to question this notion of Exceptionalism, confronting it with Indigenous voices and perspectives, debate about capacity, and through an inquiry into the theoretical framework supporting this confrontation using structuration theory. This section serves as a foundation for the second half of this study, which delves specifically into the sustainability debate – environmental protection and governance which as developed above supported Arctic exceptionalism and the creation of the Arctic Council.

Genesis of Exceptionalism in the Arctic: Indigenous Voices

While the Arctic Council was established in 1996, the Inuit Circumpolar Council was established in 1977 and represents the Inuit of Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Chukotka. Canada's attention towards the Arctic included the enforcement of colonial violence. From forced relocations, forced

sedentarisation, project surname, and residential schools, the Inuit of Canada have experienced the worst of the country's colonial legacy as the federal government of Canada aimed to secure its sovereignty claims over its Arctic territory against competing interests from regional actors such as the U.S. (Dunning, 2013; Tassinari, 1995; F. Tester & Kulchyski, 2011). Danish involvement in Greenland has a longer history, but the colonial violence is similar with forced sterilisation of Inuit girls and women, theft of Inuit children put into Danish families, as well as forced sedentarisation (Bryant, 2024; Olsen, 2024). From either side of the Baffin Sea, the rush towards the Arctic during and after the Second World War meant the continuation and increase of colonial violence, disregard for Inuit life, and disregard for ecosystems as well. The creation of the ICC came about to strengthen Inuit resilience against this colonial wave. The ICC represents an adaptation to western legal and institutional frameworks in order to anchor self-determination strategies in Westphalian terms and is an act of cultural revival for Inuit governance (Ackrén, 2022; Soer, 2023; Tagalik et al., 2023).

Inuit self-determination was fought for by Inuit leaders and communities, aided by international (Indigenous) movements towards human rights and Indigenous rights. The Universal Declaration of the Human Rights in 1948, human security as defined by the UNDP's Human Development Report of 1994, and the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, paved the way for the institutional and legal support of both Greenland's and Nunavut's rights against colonial violence and in favor of self-determination. Greenland and Nunavut, as well as the many other Indigenous nations worldwide, served as precursors for the adoption of some of these international frameworks (Assembly of First Nations, 2017; Cambou, 2020; Government of Canada, 2021; United Nations, 1948, 1994). The Nunavut Act of 1993 utilized the existing governance framework of Canada – federalism – to position themselves accordingly in negotiation strategies. Similarly, Greenland's Home Rule Act of 1978 utilized the existing governance frameworks of Denmark – keen to be seen as the 'good colonizer' as well as using the political representation in parliament developments of the 1970s – to position themselves with the Danish state (Ackrén, 2022, 2024).

For Greenland, the Second World War meant an ambivalent status as a U.S. protectorate in 1941 during the Nazi invasion of Denmark – a protectorate status sparked by plans of other powers such as the UK and Canada to take control over certain parts of the island – and remained under Danish control after the war. The establishment of U.S. military bases and diplomatic relations during that time propelled Greenland into imperial circumpolar diplomacy by incorporating the island in global security concerns amidst the Second World War and Cold War (Ackrén, 2022).

Inuit leadership in Nunavut anchored their claims in the modern treaty process – also known as comprehensive land claims agreements – started by the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement of 1975 led by the Cree, Inuit, and Naskapi. Leadership by the Kalaallit and Nunavummiut supported Inuit self-determination and self-government, enabled by both domestic frameworks and international frameworks, and supported the stabilization of the Arctic region and further contributes to global environmental management (Zellen, 2022; Osakada, 2022).

As such, the notion of exceptionalism – understood as a zone of institutionalized diplomacy and scientific collaboration in environmental management and governance – becomes more nuanced when Indigenous perspectives are included and foregrounded. Colonial violence and disregard of Inuit interests has shaped contemporary dynamics in Nunavut and Greenland, a violence also

enacted by the private sector (Bellehumeur, 2020; M. Hansen, 2025; Jørgensen, 2025; Pauktuutit, Inuit Women of Canada et al., 2014). Despite the devolution agreement signed in 1993, it required the passing of the Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement in 2024 for Nunavut to gain the ability to administer lands, development and resource management, receive royalties on public lands, and has the opportunity to "continue strengthening education, employment and other northern-led investments in land and resource development" (CIRNAC, 2024). It took 32 years after the signing of the 1993 Nunavut Agreement for the transfer of responsibilities over public lands, natural resources, and water rights – in other words, key areas of environmental governance - to be made from the Federal Government of Canada to the Government of Nunavut. On Greenland's side, the Home Rule Act of 1978 and the Self-Government Act of 2008 came about as Greenlandic political representation in Danish parliament became possible in 1970s where greater Kalaallit autonomy could be put on the agenda also in retaliation of colonial social policies, once again through Kalaallit advocacy (Ackrén, 2022).

The Self-Government Act recognized Greenlanders as "a people according to international law with the right to self-determination" (Ackrén, 2022, p.5) and natural resources and their management were now under the jurisdiction of the Greenlandic government. Despite greater control, some mining activities, such as shown in the 2025 documentary "Greenland's White Gold" [Grønlands Hvide Guld], have continued to undermine communities' development and wellbeing through lack of environmental and workers' rights oversight (Hansen, 2025; Hansen, Johnstone, 2019; Hubbard, 2013; Nuttall, 2012; Larsen, Ingimundarson, 2023; Larsen, Huskey, 2020; Stefánsdóttir, 2014). From the perspective of human security, therefore, intrinsically linked to environmental management, Arctic Exceptionalism did not extend to the rights of Indigenous Peoples in every capacity.

While Inuit leadership and Inuit rights have been carved into circumpolar institutional frameworks and international law, the reality on the ground remains a discrepancy in power and governance, albeit with different manifestations in Nunavut and Greenland. In Nunavut, the Devolution over Lands and Resources Agreement was signed in 2024, while control over resources was devolved to Greenland following the Act on Greenland Self-Government, which came into force in 2009. The discrepancy in the timeline pertaining to the control over natural resources development between the territory and the autonomous region impacted the economic self-determination of the two Arctic regions, with conversation on mining development only just being part of the jurisdiction of the Government of Nunavut compared to Greenland. However, the greater control exercised by Greenland before Nunavut, and its overall jurisdiction over domestic matters, enabled the autonomous region to pursue an economic development path that the territory of Nunavut could not. On other justice matters, Canada implemented UNDRIP in 2021 and released its Action Plan in 2023. Denmark apologized in 2022 for the removal of Greenlandic children from their parents, and the forced sterilization campaign of the 1960s and 70s is still under investigation for compensation (Olsen, 2024). While indeed there was no active military conflict in the Arctic and states had open diplomatic channels, the emphasis on diplomatic and scientific activity and peaceful cooperation disregards the different ways colonial violence and (economic) paternalism affected the Inuit in Nunavut and Greenland in their ability to lead environmental management on their lands. Nonetheless, while the notion may have been imperfect, its institutional support by organizations like the Arctic Council pushed for greater circumpolar cooperation amidst the threats of climate change and anthropogenic pollution.

The Capacity Debate Revisited in Nunavut and Greenland

As the notion of Arctic Exceptionalism is now fading from mainstream discourse, whose future is uncertain since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Dyck, 2024; Lackenbauer, Dean, 2020; Smith, 2022) , the subsequent halt of Arctic Council activities (which have partially resumed) and the threats of U.S. imperialism on Canada and Greenland (Olesen, 2020), have led to a temptation in the media to frame Greenland as almost powerless against the superpowers (Soer, 2025).

While this realist perspective certainly allows for an understanding of Great Power competition, it erodes and eludes local powers as well as institutional powers. The capacity for smaller (territorial) governments to act on the regional and international political scene is complex and differs based on jurisdictional powers. Greenland and Nunavut do not have similar jurisdictional powers regarding international relations nor regional relations. The devolution agreement of Nunavut and the devolution agreement of Greenland are not comparable in terms of international relations where Greenland has a larger room of maneuver than Nunavut (Loukacheva, 2007b; Home Rule, 1978; Nunavut Land Claims Agreement Act, 1993). While Greenland does not have military power, it can establish international diplomatic relations and has its own Foreign, Security and Defence Policy "Nothing About Us Without Us" published in 2024. Greenland is represented by Denmark in Canada, but Canada does have an honorary consulate in Nuuk which opened in 2024. The U.S. also has a consulate in Nuuk which opened in 2020. The capacity debate to defend Greenland's and Nunavut's interests both domestically and internationally is anchored in multiple areas and deeply shape the ways both actors anchor their claims pertaining to their own economic development.

In resource exploitation, capacity limitations are often cited by both scientific analysis and by the interview respondents as the core difficulties behind the development of the sector in Nunavut and Greenland (Rosa et al., 2023; interview respondent - Greenlandic representative, economic development, private sector). The lack of local qualified personnel and the lack of connectivity, such as roads which participates in the difficulties faced by the remoteness of both locations, render the establishment of resource exploitation infrastructures costly and lengthy – relying on foreign labour and importation of materials via flight or shipping (AMAP, 2018; Holroyd, 2024; Thaarup et al., 2020). While these limited capacities in terms of labour and infrastructure add constrains on the development of the mining sector, its development has always been a long-term projection. The infrastructural and labour constrains add layer of difficulty, and as such, the political discourses of reaching economic independence in Greenland and enhanced economic health in Nunavut through the mining sector is a long-term investment rather than an immediate return investment (interview respondents – Nunavut and Greenland government representatives and private sector representatives). Therefore, while the Nunavut Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement of 2024 enables greater control by the government of Nunavut over its resources, it remains a long-term development strategy to invest in the mining sector.

The 2025 Greenlandic elections saw the management of natural resource development, the need for economic development, and securing independence from Denmark as central questions. The results of the March 2025 elections juxtaposes two conceptions and approaches to Greenlandic independence: the Demokraatit party leader Jens-Frederik Nielsen, takes a more progressive approach to independence, whereas the runner-up Naleraq seeks a much more rapid approach to independence from Denmark (Lukiv & Kirby, 2025). In terms of resource exploitation, while

Naleraq has historically opposed uranium mining, the Greenlandic parliament and government are debating the zero-tolerance policy on uranium mining (Berthelsen, 2025). The different approaches to economic self-determination relating to independence address a key issue in the development of the natural resource exploitation sector. Demokraatit, a social-liberal party, advocates for tax incentives, streamlined regulations and reduced state intervention while Naleraq remains "deeply skeptical to foreign investment" and "must retain full control over its resources" (Jouan, 2025). How environmental regulations are implemented is linked to how independence is envisioned. Similarly, how foreign investments are to be regulated is deeply tied to how independence is envisioned. The new coalition and their subsequent economic policies are thereby central in understanding regional economic projections – giving substance or not to the remark that Greenland will be the Kingmaker of the Arctic Century (Menenez, 2025).

In Nunavut, this capacity debate also touches on institutional capacity in both the government and Inuit organisations. With chronic understaffing and frequent turnovers, as well as global and domestic attention towards the territory – including from the scientific research sector – engagement fatigue is an issue faced by public employees and employees from Inuit organisations (Greenlandic and Nunavummiut interview respondents, public sector and private sector). With the new 2024 Agreement, it remains to be seen how capacity reinforcement – for instance local labour force against Southern labour force, or attractiveness of skilled labour in government positions long-term – will take place to accompany the territory's greater responsibilities in resource exploitation.

Under Canadian federation, the status of Nunavut as a territory and as a modern treaty complicates the debate on capacity and sparks foundational questions on Inuit governance under a western legal and government system. Certain critiques of development oversight frameworks, such as the Environment Social Governance Framework or public consultation laws, argue that these inhibit development as they impose regulations which further increase the lengthy development process and thereby increase costs associated with development in the North (Exner-Pirot, 2024; Exner-Pirot & Gullo, 2025). The capacity debate therefore here, instead of touching directly on increasing labour capacity, touches on institutional capacity and its responsibilities in structuring development in the territory.

These areas of the capacity debate, in addition to the realist perspective described earlier, highlights a legal-institutional perspective which defines space to maneuver in environmental management and economic development for both Greenland and Nunavut. They frame both concerns and trajectories. Framing the capacity debate in terms of questioning development trajectories places emphasis on the potential of both Greenland and Nunavut in this growing attention towards Arctic resource exploitation. It frames the conditions of resource exploitation back into Inuit leadership instead of voiding it de-facto of agency and power. Capacity framed under these terms respond to the regional need for peace and security in order to advance development. Human security and Inuit self-determination supported both under domestic and international legal frameworks bring the conversation from Big Power Politics to a "glocal" perspective on regional politics – the multi-scale interconnection between local and global governance in shaping regional leadership (Mihr, 2022; Roudometof, 2015). This glocal perspective allows for a more complex and nuanced conversation on the place of Inuit leadership in international politics which, as will be developed in the second section below, impacts environmental regulatory frameworks.

Agency vs Structure: Structuration Theory in Big Power Politics and Peace

The two previous sub-sections on capacity and on Arctic Exceptionalism both view in different ways the agency of the Inuit against the structure of western imperialism and global economy pertaining to environmental and economic governance. This tension between agency and structure has grappled social scientists and forms a fundamental piece of inquiry in what moves societies, what instills change (Giddens, 1984). Structuration theory bridges both agency and structure and recognizes the power of agency (individual and collective) in shaping the structure as well as the power of the structure to shape the individual and the collective. We are products of our society, of our times, as much as our times and our society are products of our making (ibidem). Placing this continuous dialogue between agency and structure gives a path in understanding this Arctic century as a *mélange* instead of an opposition between forces.

As this section will argue, reframing big power politics in structuration theory gives another voice to medium and small powers as well as nuances the role of states by incorporating regional governments such as Nunavut and Greenland. Reframing big power politics (BPP) as well as great power competition (GPC) through structuration theory opens up the conversation to the inclusion of Inuit governments and leadership in regional circumpolar dynamics, specifically in environmental and economic governance. From an institutionalist perspective, international frameworks supported by international bodies such as UNDRIP give Indigenous rights a legally-biding standing in international law for the signatories, which Denmark and Canada are. Placing Greenland is a position of power is interesting from the viewpoint of structuration theory: Greenland becomes both the 'structure' and the 'agency' of the equation by being both the Kingmaker and on the receiving end of global imperialism thereby breaking the separated duality of structure vs agency - exemplifying the argument of structuration theory.

Arctic politics would thereby enter a form of governmentality: in response to global imperial rush towards itself, Arctic powers would frame their actions according to those global dynamics; in response to imperial pressure, it reacts by adopting the mainstream; in reaction to sovereignty threats, it reacts by adopting a sovereignty discourse. It is thereby argued here that entering global politics through established international frameworks and Great Power Competition would require a discursive negotiation strategy in the maintenance of sovereignty. It becomes a balancing act between self-determination with global forces – once again composed by both agency and structure, entering a governmentality dynamic in diplomacy. An independent Greenland relies however on the willingness of these Big Powers to respect the international status quo and international law. Should the U.S. choose to invade Greenland or Canada (and Nunavut by proxy), they would lose their agency.

Structuration theory thereby here touches on the abiding of international law by all actors. Should some lose agency in whatever capacity, then the balancing act becomes skewed. Today however, Nunavut continues the upholding of its 1993 Agreement and the devolution of powers, and Greenland remains focused on asserting independence from Denmark and on its own economic development path. In today's context, the threats of an imbalance between agency and structure spark further energy towards ensuring Inuit sovereignty and self-determination as the recent Greenlandic elections show. The Arctic Century as a *mélange* instead of confrontational however shifts the conceptualization of peace towards effective long-term stability instead of only conceptualized against conflict. Structuration theory thereby here serves as a theoretical path to

understanding what peace and security entail for the Arctic: a peace and security which foregrounds human security - including Indigenous rights and international (imperial) actors in sustainable economic development.

Shaping Development through Natural Resources: An Ideological Crossroads

Structuration theory as shown previously enables a nuanced conversation about responsibility and power in circumpolar relations according to both domestic frameworks, regional frameworks, and international frameworks. It allows also for a conversation on the meaning behind policies and trajectories pertaining to development. It enables a conversation on power anchored in space – both physical and imagined. The development of natural resources in Nunavut and Greenland is strongly anchored in environmental and ecological considerations both through government policies (environmental impacts assessments and laws) and Inuit epistemologies. As such, natural resources development and sustainable development enter in political and economic discussion informing government trajectories on building local economic resilience (see the results of the recent Greenlandic elections discussed below). Hence, on natural resources management, Arctic Exceptionalism through Inuit perspectives both informs and is informed by environmental management.

"Nothing About Us Without Us", as the Greenlandic government proclaims, echoes beyond the realm of defence and foreign affairs and evocates also the need to frame Arctic policies according to Inuit knowledge and Inuit perspectives. An Arctic by and for the Arctic Peoples. As such, sustainable development has been at the ideological crossroads between capitalist productivism, growth, environmental preservation and conservation, and local voices and conceptions of *being* in an ecosystem, *being* in a society.

The idea of development post-Industrial Revolution has evolved and is lived differently by peoples based on lived experiences both historically and contemporarily. The idea of development, while intrinsically linked to colonial expropriation under a global capitalist system (Ghosh, 2021; Good, 1976; Larrain, 2013), thereby requires nuance when applied to describe the relationship of peoples and their leadership with both local and global economies. Sustainable development as defined by the United Nations' homonymous framework seeks to bridge economic imperatives with environmental concerns and human security concerns. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals seek to address the different realms of human security combined with environmental sustainability. As such, poverty, education, health, hunger, gender equality, reduced inequalities, peace and justice, strong institutions and industry, decent work and economic growth, are coupled with clean water, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, the safeguarding of life below water and on land, affordable and clean energy, as well as the need for partnership to achieve the aforementioned goals (United Nations, n.d.). In such a framework, sustainable development does not negate the need for development – or for growth – but negates the equivalency placed between development and negative environmental impacts and seeks an alternative technocratic path (Adamowicz, 2022; Katz-Rosene, 2025; Morse, 2008; Ziai, 2016). This second section seeks to dive deeper into sustainability against a colonial framework, looking specifically into the idea of decolonial ecological security – seeking thereby to qualify Inuit development within this larger glocal questioning of peace and security amidst resource development and big power politics.

Inuit Development vs. Colonial Frameworks: Sustainable Development in Nunavut and Greenland

The operationalization of sustainability in Nunavut and Greenland is anchored in global discourses on sustainability as well as locally framed understandings of what sustainability entails (Amanor & Moyo, 2008; Escobar 1995, 2014; Ghosh, 2021; Morse, 2008; Ziai, 2016). However, analysis of power dynamics within the Global North, including in the Arctic, bring such critiques internally: these analyses as related to the climate crisis are often focused on environmental inequality – mainly environmental racism – where the effects of the climate crisis are shown to disproportionally impact marginalized communities (Gutschow et al., 2021; Sealey-Huggins, 2018; Whyte, 2018).

Sensitive to the lived realities in the Arctic, here focused on the North American Arctic, works by various scholars (Bellehumeur, 2020; Dowsley et al., 2010; Kafarowski, 2005, 2009; Krupnik et al., 2010; Kuokkanen, 2009; Pedersen, 2003; Quintal-Marineau, 2017; Somby, 2016) have highlighted the differentiated impact of climate change on Inuit women and other Arctic Indigenous women as well as the specific sets of environmental knowledge they possess, offering a comprehensive perspective on the effects of climate change (Dowsley et al., 2010). Tester and Irniq (2009) argue that the confrontation between the imperatives of sovereign control over the land by the state and the decolonial struggle for Inuit knowledge affirmation results in the subversion of sustainability and Inuit knowledge by the state to serve its own interest (F. J. Tester & Irniq, 2009, p.50). In an Arctic context, notions of sustainability are oftentimes developed through specific perspectives – hunting and cultural rights, (economic) self-determination rights, and quality of life rights such as housing and heating – thereby highlighting the difficulty in applying concepts such as sustainability to sub-regions such as the North American Arctic.

This newest phase of development – sustainable development – has thereby provided a new outlet for the reproduction of traditional colonial dynamics between the state and Indigenous peoples (Fjellheim, 2022, 2023; Normann, 2021). The asymmetrical power dynamics between the national governments and the Nunavut and Greenlandic governments are echoed in the economic and social realities of the territories. The Territory of Nunavut has the lowest life expectancy of Canada and is facing systemic food insecurity as well as lower educational levels. Additionally, housing shortage, healthcare discrepancies, domestic violence, and alcoholism impact opportunities for livelihood opportunities development and overall social cohesion (Department of Family Services, 2024; ITK, 2019; Lee et al., 2022).

While the Canadian federal government continues to invest in the decarbonization of energy, this decarbonization parallels ongoing structural difficulties faced by Nunavummiut and hence, instead of creating a binary opposition between renewable energy development and development of basic infrastructures, the fundamental question of setting priorities and paths towards just and equitable development offers a realm of possibilities against what former Minister Aminata Dramante Traoré calls the "rape of the imaginary" (Traoré, 2002). An Inuit decolonial sustainable development is hence informed by complex structural needs (housing, economic opportunities, healthcare, education) in which sustainability plays a central role in ensuring cultural, identity, and resource priorities. These complex structural needs are embedded in a holistic, ecological, cultural and linguistic realm for which cultural revitalization – such as language revitalization – is fundamental (Kelly et al., 2024; Levesque, 2002; Peter et al., 2002; Watt-Cloutier, 2016; Whyte, 2017). Hence, Inuit decolonialism, while not necessarily unique in some respects, stands apart as a junction of

practical implementation of self-determination, structural needs, and cultural revitalization supporting Inuit knowledge. Sustainable development then, contrary to oppositional discourses between neoliberal capitalist development and post-growth, takes on a more nuanced and complex approach. As such, this sub-section argues that this specificity of Inuit decolonialism structures how regional and domestic development are framed by both actors - Nunavut and Greenland - within their respective jurisdiction. This structuring of economic development is deeply anchored in environmental considerations, themselves responding to global and regional political and economic dynamics - as detailed in the first section.

Rights and Sovereignty: Interests and Rights on Resource Development

While the environmental impacts of military development in the circumpolar Arctic is beyond the scope of this article, both hard and human security imperatives have incorporated resource development as a core element (Barnes, 2019; Exner-Pirot, 2023; Hoogensen Gjørv et al., 2020). As the Canadian federal government released its Critical Minerals Strategy in 2022, the Environment-Social-Governance standards, Indigenous partnerships, and global security concerns are highlighted as key forces guiding the development of the sector (p.1, p.5, p.13, p.33). The Strategy holds six (6) focus areas and initiatives: exploration, research, development and innovation; accelerating responsible project development; building sustainable infrastructure; advancing reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples; growing a diverse workforce and prosperous communities; and strengthening global leadership and security (Government of Canada, 2022).

The Government of Canada thereby positions itself on two fronts. On one side, Canada is positioning itself as a global reserve of critical minerals, a country rich in resources that can be used for a sustainable global good foregrounding human rights and environmental imperatives. On the other side, Canada is also positioning itself in a strategic security chessboard, against the monopolization of these resources by a few key actors. China is not mentioned once in the document but holds the vast majority of global production of minerals (Weihuan, 2024). The federal government is thereby joining sustainable imperatives with human rights – in line with the SDGs – with security imperatives.

This combination of axis echoes the earlier critiques made by sustainable development critical authors of the cooptation of sustainability by imperial actors (Banerjee, 2003; Escobar, 2014; Normann, 2021; Ziai, 2016). While the Canadian government advocates for partnership with Indigenous peoples regarding mineral production and high environmental standards, tensions and violences such as for the TC Pipeline in Wet'suwet'en territory case or the Mount Polley disaster – and continued gold mining activities in the region - have showcased a different picture of the state of resource exploitation in the country. According to the Grid Arendal and UNEP report (2017), Canada was ranked second in worst mining record globally, just behind China. Abroad, 60% of the world's mining companies are Canadian and with it comes a well-documented trail of environmental and human rights abuses and crimes, especially in South America and Africa (CBC, 2023; Coumans, 2023; Roche et al., 2017). Therefore, while the government advocates for the further domestic development of the sector, its international track-record shows discrepancies between the focus areas and initiatives of the Strategy and its implementation thereby questioning the effective implementation of sustainable development (also understood as including the advancement of reconciliation with Indigenous nations) as a framework.

Despite rampant abuse, modern treaties and domestic and international frameworks, such as UNDRIP or Free, Prior, and Informed Consent, give legal and jurisdictional support to Indigenous Nations in safeguarding their interests in the resource exploitation sector through mining royalties and other arrangements. The Nunavut Agreement and the Devolution agreement of 2024 thereby act as strong safeguarding measures for the interests of the Inuit of Nunavut. In Greenland, UNDRIP similarly applies and it remains to be seen how the new coalition enacts laws regarding the streamlining of natural resource development and environmental protection measures. Greenland recently published its Mineral Resources Strategy 2025-2029 and emphasizes four (4) target areas: sustainability and society; attractive investment frameworks; critical minerals; and geological mapping and geodata. The first focus areas foregrounds population census as well as the implementation of the ESG framework – it also includes gender equality campaigns and analysis. (table 1). These two strategic policy documents establish roadmaps in the partnerships between the several layers of local and international governance bodies. In the case of Canada, this refers to the partnerships between the federal government, the territorial government, and international "allies" (objective 5, table 1). In the case of Greenland, this refers to the government of Greenland and the international community including the government of Denmark. These two documents, understood as roadmaps, thereby anchor yet again the tension between agency and structure of the Arctic Century in glocal governance as they emphasize domestic agency in shaping the future of resource exploitation in the region in relation with the global community.

Table 1. Comparative overview of the focus and target areas, and objectives and initiatives of Greenland's Mineral Resources Strategy and the Canadian Critical Minerals Strategy.

Greenland Mineral Resources Strategy 2025-2029	**The Canadian Critical Minerals Strategy 2022**
Focus area 1: Sustainability and society Societal benefits Value creation in all parts of the lifecycle of a mine Climate and environment Education and workforce The gender diversified industry Digital presence	Objectives Objective 1: Support economic growth and competitiveness. Objective 2: Promote climate action and strong environmental management. Objective 3: Advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Objective 4: Foster diverse and inclusive workforces and communities. Objective 5: Enhance global security and partnership with allies.
Focus area 2: Attractive investment frameworks Investments Permits and requirements Administration and case management Organizational structure Local anchoring	Focus Area and Initiative 1: Driving Exploration, Research & Development, and Innovation
Focus area 3: Critical Minerals	Focus Area and Initiative 2: Accelerating Responsible Project Development
Target area 4: Geological mapping and geodata Mapping	Focus Area and Initiative 3: Building Sustainable Infrastructure

Geophysics and Remote Sensing Landslides and surveillance Data generation and sharing Carbon Capture and Storage Drill core storage	
	Focus Area and Initiative 4: Advancing Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples
	Focus Area and Initiative 5: Growing a Diverse Workforce and Prosperous Communities
	Focus Area and Initiative 6: Strengthening Global Leadership and Security

Global Energy Transition: Confronting the Resource Curse

Arctic institutions and organizations such as the Arctic Council, Nunavut and Greenland's governments, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, or even the Arctic Economic Council, have different levels of jurisdiction and enforcement powers but all seek to contribute in meaningful ways to the development and well-being of Arctic societies and peoples. They seek to advocate for the rights of local communities and for sustainable business practices (Arctic Council, n.d.; Arctic Council & Sustainable Development Working Group, 2021; Canadian Association of Native Development Officers et al., 2022; Naalakkersuisut, 2025). As respondents from both Greenland and Nunavut have emphasized, responsible relationship building is essential to conducting business in the Arctic (interview respondents). Public consultations, in Nunavut under the larger Duty to Consult law for instance, have become staples in the establishment of business relations in the region.

The cryolite mine in Greenland is an important example of both lack of public consultation and lack of due diligence in supporting regional and local development (M. Hansen, 2025). As the 2014 Pauktuutit report also highlights, the mining industry has shown elevated rates of sexual violence and gender-based discrimination specifically targeting Inuit women. The edited volume by Southcott et al. (2019) on *Resources and Sustainable Development in the Arctic* has sought to answer the most grappling questions of sustainable development: "How can resource extraction be best used to create successful societies? What are the best ways to avoid the staples trap/resource curse? How can resource extraction best contribute to the well-being of producing regions and communities? What institutions best ensure that producing regions and communities benefit from resource extraction?" (Huskey, Southcott, 2019, p.158). As the authors emphasize, this resource curse – where the large presence of natural resources paradoxically can result in decreased development possibilities for a community (p.3) – is not a doomed destiny but an outcome that can be avoided with effective and adequate institutions (p.3, p.145, p.167) – joining here the argument of Young on the importance of institutional arrangements or regimes to support sustainable development beyond domestic frameworks (Young, 1992, p.228). Recent developments in ensuring local consultations, local approval, and due diligence in economic returns for the local community have served as structural walls safeguarding from the pitfalls of resource development: as the aforementioned authors highlight, effective institutional structures are fundamental to avoid a resource curse (Ostrom, 2008).

On energy transition and its snowball effect on the mining industry, UNCLOS delineates responsibilities and rights over sovereign territories: both Nunavut and Greenland have legal frameworks in place which explicitly requires the safeguarding of the environment (biodiversity included) for mining projects to go forward, both on land and offshore. Despite the media attention towards a hypothetical rush towards Arctic resources, and despite potential political movements in favour of streamlining the development of natural resources exploitation, these legal frameworks offer a very different perspective on the structuring of Arctic resource exploitation. On the contrary, what these legal and institutional frameworks show is a circumpolar willingness towards safeguarding resources and willingness to avoid direct confrontation between states.

On renewable energy infrastructure, the new hydroelectric dam in Iqaluit has reached community consensus supporting its construction. This consensus was achieved after years of negotiation and community consultation where the community always retained the right to refuse (Sarkisian, 2025). The results of the recent elections in Greenland, while dominated by questions of independence, were also due to public dissatisfaction towards the new fishing laws restricting commercial fishing – one of the largest economic sectors of the country (Lukiv & Kirby, 2025).

These two contrasting cases exemplify the importance of community consultation and information on sustainability practices. To reflect on the words of Dr. Abele (2019), "thinking about healthy northern economic and social development in regional terms is intuitively appealing. It requires, though, that regions be identified purposefully, to make it possible to respect the reality of the communities in which people choose to live, while understanding change and formulating choices with appropriate territories and institutions in mind" (p.177). The institutional and legal framing of development along sustainability requires both cross-border collaboration and local consultation enabling local decision-making powers. This approach to "authoritative decision-making and political debate" (ibidem) on a range of scales from international collaborations to domestic laws offers a path forward outside of threats of conflicts in development. The approach thereby offers a different perspective from the realist concerns towards increased conflict in the Arctic and offers a vision anchored in the effectiveness of multi-scale (and glocal) environmental management, especially in Greenland and Nunavut.

Arctic Decolonial Ecology as Security

Development in Nunavut and Greenland is structured by a complex web of interconnected imperatives shaping how sustainability is operationalized by the two regions, and how sustainable thereby shapes the concepts of peace and security. As Peter et al. (2002) emphasize, the relational importance towards the non-human and the whole ecosystem – where each individual has a spirit ("tarniq") which flows across species – guides understandings of what it means to be living sustainably in the Arctic. Inuit identity is deeply intertwined with the natural world and as such, the mainstreaming of sustainability as a development paradigm by states leads to a dynamical confrontation with Inuit self-determination and way of life both conceptually and in law.

Similarly, Mary Simon (2009) exposes the need to combine climate action with Inuit self-determination and reconciliation. Pitseolak Pfeifer (2020) highlights the need for Inuit leadership in climate change adaptation and mitigation research and policy, marking "a different way of investing research resources and of thinking through the complexity of the Arctic ecosystem: land, water, animals, and people. (p.268)". In Greenland, Sara Olsvig confronts the irony and absurdity of political state tensions after Trump's push towards purchasing Greenland by reminding that

Greenlandic people have agency and self-determination rights. As these authors and thinkers expose Inuit perspectives on what sustainability and ecology mean up in the Arctic, they expose deep contradictions between neo-liberal and capitalist needs for development and what development means for Inuit. As such, sustainable development becomes a linguistic confrontation between epistemological realms.

These epistemological realms, infused by vastly different living conditions, reflect the ongoing tensions present in what it means to govern Nunavut and Greenland. In the Wildlife Act (2003) and in the First Annual report of the Inuit Qaujimajatuqanginnut (IQ) Task Force (2002), Inuit epistemological worldviews are made explicit from the very first sentence of the Wildlife Act, where "comprehensive" management understands the interconnectedness of plants, animals, and humans, as well as explicitely calls for the implementation of the guiding principles of Inuit Qaujimajatunqangit (S.Nu. 2003, c.26, p.1). While the Nunavut Agreement of 1993 and Greenland Home Rule of 1978 were the foundational blocks for both Inuit homelands, these efforts were framed to remain readable and compose with state power in an acute understanding that without state support – and therefore the need to politically compromise from an Inuit standpoint – a devolution agreement would never have seen the light of day (Soer, 2023). This dynamic of political readability is not to undermine Inuit agency and resilience but to recognize asymmetrical power relations that continue to shape Inuit-state relations with for instance the Nunavut devolution on resources and revenues only having been signed in 2024, 31 years after the 1993 Agreement.

Inuit ecological security is supported greatly by Inuit knowledge (Carter et al., 2025; Dawson et al., 2020; Pearce et al., 2015; Peter et al., 2002). From wildlife conservation to sea-ice knowledge, ecological security has served as a fundamental basis in the establishment of Nunavut's and Greenland's self-determination: self-determination through the management and development of resources according to ecological knowledge (Wildlife Act - c.26 | Legislation, 2003). Additionally, in a Canadian context, Inuit ecological knowledge supports the deployment of the military in the Arctic through the Canadian Rangers – of which the vast majority are Indigenous. Their deep knowledge of the land is essential in missions and thereby supports Canadian sovereignty over the North (Kikkert & Lackenbauer, 2021).

Greenlandic resource development has evolved through a juxtaposition of ecological imperatives and economic imperatives – a juxtaposition supporting independence. While the Nunavut Agreement talks about conservation and management, IQ talks about avatittinnik kamatsiarniq – respect and care for the land, animals, and the environment. While the Agreement frames human use of the land as "requirements", "priorities", "optimum protection", IQ frames use of land within a relationship which brings about responsibilities and an ethics of care. Specifically, IQ anchors the conceptualization of ecological security outside of realist, state-centric understandings of security to incorporate critical constructivist perspectives. Such conceptual perspectives, thereby decenter the colonial from security towards instead a decolonial ecological conceptualization of security. Following thereby the decentering approaches of the critiques to development, decolonial ecology operates a similar push towards reframing power dynamics in shaping development discourses. Natural resource development under the premise of decolonial ecological security thereby serves both self-government and the re-evaluation of the substance of self-determination outside of colonial frames of extractivist economic development. Zacharias Kunuk's documentary series on mining and its environmental impacts shared on IsumaTV, shows how relationality to both

environment and community underpins identity formation and underpins epistemological discursive creations (Kunuk, 2019).

As Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit is divided and explained in 8 principles, a worldview comes to light against which the administrative frameworks of sustainability, from the Environment Social Governance framework to the SDGs, seems to clash in both linguistics and substance. Ecology has thereby been a strong vector for Inuit self-determination and continues to be a guiding force in not only circumpolar development but in global advocacy and governance efforts as well – the President of Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. Aluki Kotierk is serving as Chair for the 2025 United Nations Permanent Forum of Indigenous Issues. Her opening speech highlights the importance of Indigenous leadership on "our lands, territories, cultures, and the future of our communities" which they are too often excluded from. In this vein, an Arctic century thereby foregrounds Inuit leadership in environmental governance through decolonial ecological security where "individual and collective rights are non-negotiable" (Kotierk, 2025). Decolonial ecological security thereby conceptually frames the shaping of (environmental) governance and development as applied to Nunavut and Greenland.

Conclusion

Arctic peace and security are deeply intertwined with Inuit environmental governance. As Greenland holds significant weight in the future of the circumpolar Arctic through its strategic geographical positioning and through its natural resource potential, cross-border Inuit leadership resonates regionally and internationally. While Nunavut and Greenland fall under different governance systems and enjoy different jurisdictional powers, under the framework of structuration theory, the two regions see the confrontation of several dynamics: Inuit epistemologies, modern economic development incentives, and great power competition and pressures. The re-evaluation undertaken of the notion of peace and security in the Arctic further develops the conceptual framework of Inuit decolonial ecological security to inform Arctic security studies. It reevaluates the triad Arctic exceptionalism – environmental governance – Inuit self-determination through the prism of both decolonial security and ecological security joined under a single conceptual framework. As such, Nunavut and Greenlandic environmental governance is adapting the global paradigm of sustainable development through its own decolonial economic and political agency. This adaptation thereby informs the development of natural resources exploitation, under increasing international and regional pressures and rising diplomatic tensions threatening regional institutional cooperation.

The 21st century is seeing the results of decades of self-determination advocacy by Inuit leaders and communities, leading to effective Inuit governance structures generating and in turn supported by international legal frameworks such as UNDRIP. While it remains unclear how this leadership will evolve in light of the recent tensions with the US. and Russia, the Inuit leadership footprint has shaped circumpolar dynamics. Against rising tensions and challenges to democratic rule of law, the Arctic century will thereby be shaped along this crux in between Inuit self-determination and imperial power coopting global sustainable development and decarbonization. Resource development forms the site of contestation in this crux. Inuit decolonial ecology has thereby grown its roots within resource development governance by shaping circumpolar cooperative dynamics through legally binding treaties.

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